

Drugs Wars The Burning Times



EXECUTION OF MRS. ANN HIBBINS.

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A friend of mine was coming back from the west coast last spring. She is an exceedingly generous person, to a fault. She will spend her own money, time and resources to help people even when she does not have enough for herself. She will loan out her belongings to people who need them, even if she needs them. So when a friend asked her to bring back a bag from the west coast, of course she said yes. They were driving through Tennessee late at night when they got pulled over. I don't know why the police suspected anything, but they brought in their dog and found about a pound of marijuana in the bag she was bringing back from the west coast. There was no way she was going to blame it anyone else.

Thus began a difficult and harrowing drama. Her family is not wealthy. Her parents are divorced. Her father said something ingracious and excused himself from the situation entirely. Her mother has health problems. I started calling lawyers, calling friends, trying to figure out the likely outcomes, the expenses, where the money might be raised. Another woman in the jailhouse recommended an attorney. I talked to him, and immediately assessed him to be a sleaze. But before I could intervene, her mother stepped in and hired him, and that was that, he was the official council. Given the amount of marijuana she was caught with, she could be sentenced to years in jail. She is young, she had plans to start back in college shortly after she got back from her trip.

There were a few strained phone calls back and forth. She was not well. She was panicked by the thought of spending years in jail, stressed by the regimentation, dirt, and interpersonal conflict in the county jail. Only later did we discover that these phone calls were billed at over a dollar a minute from the jail. How they justify that I cannot say. I was raised a redneck. It felt like one of our kinfolk had been kidnapped and we should go and take her back. We restrained ourselves.

She went to the first hearing, and we were frightened. I didn't trust her lawyer at all. Somewhere in the legal wrangling, a miracle was wrought. It turns out her attorney was not only above board, but was owed a few favors by somebody. She got probation, a fine, and a few weeks in jail, part of that served already. The black women back at the jail swore she had slept with someone to get off that easy. She hadn't.

She finally came home, tired and stressed. She drove herself from Tennessee, but a few days later, I had to go get her from the side of the road. She had a panic attack, and couldn't drive herself home. She was not sleeping, she was having nightmares when she did sleep. She was saddled with thousands of dollars in fines, and no means to raise the money. If you can't pay, you go back to jail, which happens to a lot of people. A number of people contributed what they could. Finally, a relative of hers agreed to cover the rest. Still the nightmares continued. She was struggling, she seemed to be withdrawing from some of her friends.

myriad other measures the money managers could use to run our economy, but the preferred means is to use a fluctuating level of unemployment among the lower class as a hedge against economic and ecological pressures. They refer to this hedge as the NonAccelerating Inflationary Rate of Unemployment, or NAIRU.

As resource prices increase, more people will be put out of work to balance the economy. As more people are put out of work, witch hunting will be escalated to put more pressure on a potentially restless working class. If this sounds too theoretical, it is precisely the scenario that resulted in the recent escalation of the hunt. The oil price hikes of the 1970s, although political in nature, mimicked the affect of environmental constraint. The conservative movement made use of the economic stress, and pushed the impact onto a growing lower class. The War on Drugs was recreated anew. If we continue down the current path, the hunt will escalate. The pressure on the lower class to absorb the impact of environmental constraint will grow. The new Inquisition will soon be upon us.

It is time we abandoned conservative fearmongering and liberal complicity. We have to consciously remake our society, devolving power away from transnational corporate oligarchy and into local communities, and evolving a sustainable and conscious culture based on locally accessible power. From that base of power local power, we have to form a movement that can transform the patterns of history, and build a conscious and wise society to replace the blind and divided one in which we live. We can drop the petty political reformisms, remake our common political consciousness, our economy, and our society, or we can wait for the sound of the baying hounds.

exceeding the deaths caused by illegal drugs by twenty to one.¹⁷ Medication is sold by rich people, drugs are sold by poor people, and the factor of harm is another matter entirely.

What of the future of the hunt in America? Certainly wealthy conservatives support it. The majority of liberals support it to some degree, having been convinced of the supernatural class contagion of "drugs." Even if we manage to achieve some justice in some places in relation to some drug laws, the hunt will continue. It is deeply embedded in the fabric of our class divided society. The only way we will ever stop the hunt is by gaining a popular awareness and conscious influence over the organization of our culture as a whole.

This is terribly important in our time because the environmental constraints we face are only going to escalate the hunt. Specifically, the degradation of natural "renewable" resources, and increased demand, is going to drive prices upward. The world fish catch peaked nearly twenty years ago, as did world grain production per capita, as did the supply of irrigated farmland per capita.¹⁸ Both increased population growth and the increased abilities of people in less-developed countries to mimic the consumption patterns of Westerners is going to continue to drive up the consumption of fish, meat, paper, and other natural resources. These resources are renewable only so long as they are used within the ability of natural systems to replenish themselves. As demand puts increasing pressure on supply, prices will go up.

The same scenario will play itself out in our use of mineral resources. We naturally mine the highest concentrations of minerals first, and pump the shallow oil first. As time passes and economic "growth" consumes ever greater quantities of mineral and fossil resources, we find ourselves digging deeper mines, using lower-grade ores, and pumping oil from deeper and less accessible places. The affect is an increase in the cost of these resources.¹⁹

Our class based society has, and will continue to, shift the burden on increased resource prices onto the lower class. The specific means of such shifting is fiscal policy. As resource prices increase, prices increase. The Federal Reserve responds to inflationary pressure by increasing interest rates. This drives up unemployment, which pulls down wages, and thus decreases inflationary pressure. There are

I think she will be okay. Things are coming back together slowly. The fallout has been enormous. The affect on someone who was less white, with less family or financial support, or less luck, would be devastating. That system puts enormous stress on people, and some never escape its grip.

This is but one small story among millions in the War on Drugs. All things told, my friend got off easy, and easy is still hard. America imprisons more of its population, as an absolute number and on a per-capita basis, than any other nation on earth, ever. Nearly two million people are locked in steel cages in the United States, most of them for non-violent "crimes," most of those being drug offenses.¹

There are a number of organizations struggling for penal reform, trying to raise the public consciousness about the waste and destruction caused by that system.² I applaud that effort. Ultimately however, to change an institution, we have to know the driving energy behind that institution, the real force that moves it forward. Otherwise, the jails will remain full.

Does locking up two million Americans make the world a better place? Then why do we do it? Because taking "drugs" is bad for people. That is a most peculiar conclusion at which to arrive. Millions of Americans are prescribed psychoactive "medication". Recent research has uncovered numerous studies conducted by the drug companies but never published. These studies indicate that the many of the leading psychoactive "medications" prescribed for depression in the U.S. have a statistically insignificant affect when compared to placebos.³ So what makes a drug illegal? The smartest way to answer that question is with a little history.

People have used mind and body-altering substances for thousands of years. In the U.S. in the 1800s, opium derivatives were used in hundreds of patent medicines and prescribed medications. Women used them to calm anxiety, or to sooth their children. Opiate derivatives were not perceived to be or portrayed as a social menace. Morphine was heavily used in the Civil War, and there were some recorded instances of addiction, but neither was that at the time considered a social menace. Opiates were even prescribed by doctors to help alcoholics break the habit of alcohol abuse, it being judged that alcohol was the more dangerous drug. Medical evidence supports this conclusion. The real menace, it turns out, came from abroad, or so that was the story at the time.⁴

Chinese immigrants were heavily employed in building the western railroads,

17 For deaths from legal drugs, see Is US Health Really the Best in the World? Barbara Starfield, Journal of the American Medical Association, JAMA 2000;284:483-485 at <http://jama.ama-assn.org/content/vol284/issue4/index.dtl> For deaths from illegal drugs, see note 13

18 Brown, Lester, State of the World 1993, Norton, NY, 1993, p.12-13, Gardner, Gary, Shrinking Fields, Cropland Loss in a World of Eight Billion, WorldWatch Paper 131, WorldWatch Institute, 1996, p. 20, Stang, Patti, Conley, Stephen, USA Snapshots, Food Exports Are Cooking, USA Today, July 27, 1994 http://www.heifer.org/Learn/World_Ark/Online/Lester_Brown.shtml

19 For an extraordinary account of the role of technology and resource depletion, see Wilkinson, Richard G., *Poverty and Progress, An Ecological Model of Economic Development*, Methuen and Co Ltd London, 1973

1 <http://www.prisonsucks.com/>, <http://www.criticalresistance.org/>, <http://prisonactivist.org/>

2 *ibid*

3 Is it Prozac? Or Placebo? Gary Greenberg, Mother Jones November/ December 2003 Issue

4 The story of drugs and minorities is outlined in Helmer, John, *Drugs and Minority Oppression*, Seabury Press, New York, 1975. For general information about addiction, opiates, and some history, see Licit and Illicit Drugs, The Consumers Union Report on Narcotics, Stimulants, Depressants, Inhalants, Hallucinogens, Marijuana, Including Caffiene, Nicotine, and Alcohol, Edward M Brecher, Little Brown and Company, Boston, 1972

in mines, and to some extent in agriculture and other occupations. They streamed in from the Far East to California and the western states in the mid 1800s. The competition between workers and lower-paid Chinese immigrants sometimes caused conflagrations and waves of anti-Chinese sentiments, a circumstance exacerbated by the use of Chinese immigrants as strike-breakers. When the nation found itself in the midst of a depression in the 1870s, anti-Chinese sentiment boiled. There were calls for forced repatriation. Chinese immigrants had been smoking opium for many years, but the "opium dens" of San Francisco overnight were proclaimed a public menace and were banned by law in 1875. Other western cities followed suite. An Oregon court recognized the racial nature of the nation's first drug laws, recording that "smoking opium is not our vice, and therefore it may be that this legislation proceeds [more] from a desire to vex and annoy the 'Heathen Chinese' in this respect, than to protect people from the evil habit."⁵ The myth of social contagion developed, giving the opium smokers almost supernatural powers in the common mind to entice middle and upper class young women and capture them in a stupor in their opium dens. This mythology has been further developed with each successive wave of drug wars. The first drug laws gave the police the right to raid Chinese homes and businesses in the context of a wave of anti-Chinese sentiments in a severely depressed labor market.

The second wave of drug laws were born in the second Civil War. The first Civil War was fought with cannons and muskets. The second was fought with lynching ropes and poll taxes. There was a widespread and systematic effort, particularly in the South, to drive blacks out of the political process, and out of ownership and private business, in the decades that followed the end of reconstruction.⁶ The newspapers started running fabricated stories of cocaine crazed black men raping white women. The objective evidence, such as it exists, indicates that cocaine use and addiction was extremely low among southern blacks. But drug wars were then, as now, remarkably immune to fact.

Having been raised a Southerner, the son of a segregationist politician, I have heard the stories first hand. They told of a black man in the county where I was born who had been accused of assaulting a white woman. He heard they were after him, so he ran. A group of white men got together a posse and pursued him to the far end of the county. They caught him, and decided to burn him at the stake. They tied him up, stacked the wood around him, and lit the fire. With the flames licking at his feet, the black man struggled frantically, and managed to pull himself loose from the ropes that bound him. He bolted and ran, only to be met with a fusillade of gunfire from his captors. The story was told to me relatively recently, in a most calm

⁵ Helmer, *ibid*, p.40-41

⁶ Piven, Francis Fox and Richard A. Cloward, *Why Americans Don't Vote*, Pantheon Books, 1988

dependent on the established authorities for protection. The clergy made themselves appear as the saviors of society - they were protecting the common people from the power of Satan. The common people were encouraged to be dependent on the established power structure and suspicious and blameful of each other.

The popular notion of witches being burned at the stake in Salem or in Medieval Europe gives only a narrow view of the witch in class-divided societies. If you examine the ethnographic record of modern Anthropology, you will find that in relatively egalitarian societies people die of old age. In a number of highly class divided societies, people never die from old age or accidents, humans only die as a result of sorcery.¹⁶ Thus someone is responsible for every death. Who gets blamed for what we might call "natural" deaths? Not the headman, or his family, or any of the upper class, but members of the lower class, outcasts, nonconformists, and trouble makers. Though the pattern varies greatly, the basic structure is the same, highly class divided societies maintain a mythology of supernatural evil, and the wealthy blame their enemies for whatever ills may befall a village. The Christians were the witches of the Roman Empire, the Jews the Witches of Nazi Germany. Witches are always deemed to be evil, and almost always believed to have great, if not supernatural, power. For the people who carry out the hunt, witches are real. Their existence is proven over and over again as evil is fought, just as the cycle of poverty, violence, and drugs is proven over and over again on the evening news.

The pattern is clear enough. The elite of highly stratified societies develop witch hunts as a means of distracting blame for social ills by creating scapegoats and thus directing social ire toward their economic competitors and defenseless groups. Witch hunting happens in every class divided society, and tends to become particularly acute in times of economic and ecological stress. It is a blind process in that the powerful perpetrators believe in their own mythology. The clergy, just as modern law enforcement, believe they are protecting society from doom. People in the lower class may or may not believe in the hunt. Certainly, many do not, but neither do they have enough power to stop it. If enough people in the middle class, or in society at large, are convinced of the importance of the hunt, then the hunt will go forward.

What is the future of true information about "drugs" and our modern American witch hunt? Culture has the power to turn the world upside down. As societies develop belief systems and those beliefs evolve, people can be taught to believe anything. Given the increased corporate influence at the Food and Drug Administration, increasingly dangerous drugs are being used as prescribed "medication." The current tally of known deaths from prescribed but poorly tested "medications," and from prescription errors, is over 170,000 people per year.

¹⁶ For one example, see Turnbull, Colin M, *The Forest People*, Simon and Schuster, 1962

What was the difference between alcohol and the drugs that remained illegal? Middle class people were drinking, and middle class people were smoking. They would tolerate only so much harassment, and thus the prohibition of alcohol was dropped. In the last few decades, tobacco use has shifted downward on the class ladder from the middle class to the working class. As fewer and fewer middle class people smoke, we are seeing increased regulation of tobacco, which is arguably the most dangerous legal or illegal drug commonly available on the market today.

The truths and fictions of addiction and contagion have had nothing to do with any of the successive waves of drug wars. Which begs the question, can we ever win the argument about sensible drug sentencing? Not through current political means. Why not? Because the War on Drugs is an integral part of class-based society. All class-based societies have extensive measures to support their social structure, the most prominent among these being the witch hunt.

The great witch hunts of the Inquisition provide the model for understanding the hunt. Between 1400 and 1700 A.D., approximately 500,000 peasants were convicted of witchcraft in Europe. For this crime, these people were tortured and burned at the stake. The torture would only be stopped after the accused had named other people whom they knew to be witches, thus insuring an unending supply of victims. This Inquisitors were the clergy, the victims were primarily women, and always poor. The crime for which these people were executed was that of being in league with the devil in various ways, including flying on broomsticks to sabbaths.¹⁴

The historical period during which these events took place was one of great social and political turmoil in Europe. There were large numbers of peasants living in wretched circumstances who were the victims of endless famines and plagues. The Church was inextricably intertwined with the State and both held onto wealth and power with a strong hand. There were numerous messianic upheavals and revolutionary movements as the peasantry fought against the wealthy and powerful who ruled over them. It has been theorized that "the practical significance of the witch mania was ... that it shifted responsibility for the crises of late medieval society from both church and state to imaginary demons in human form. Preoccupied with the fantastic activities of these demons, the distraught, alienated, pauperized masses blamed the rampant Devil instead of the corrupt clergy and rapacious nobility."¹⁵

The witch hunts served as a tool for eliminating dissent, as many populist leaders were executed. Witches always came from disempowered groups, women and the poor. By making people fearful of each other, the hunt made them more

manner, as an example of good old-fashioned justice, the kind we need today.

That was the justice of the day for blacks in the south in the decades after Reconstruction. The peak of political participation of blacks was during Reconstruction. After that, under a siege of violence and intimidation, blacks were driven out of politics and into economic marginalization. The image of the cocaine crazed black man was used to whip up a fervor. This was also a period when the American Medical Association was rising ascendant. The AMA wanted control over as many areas of medicine as possible. They drove midwives, herbalists, and homeopaths out of business and into economic marginalization.⁷ They rounded up the mentally ill people and put them in freshly built asylums where their rates of recovery declined.⁸ The AMA led the charge against abortion rights in the mid-1800s because it gave them a "moral" argument to cover their economic interests. After abortion was banned, the AMA turned its attention to controlling the drug market. In time they drove almost all the patent medicine providers off the market. Opiates, and cocaine (the latter have been discovered to be an excellent local anesthetic) became prescription-only drugs. Even as prescribed drugs, opiates were still given to patients to help cure them of alcoholism.

The first drug war was launched against the Chinese in the midst of a depression, the second drug war was launched against blacks as the legitimization of Jim Crow law and segregation. The third drug war was launched against Mexicans in the Great Depression. In 1935 federal legislation was passed that referred to marijuana as a nationwide menace. An editor of the "Daily Courier" in Alamosa, Colorado wrote in 1936, "I wish I could show you what a small marijuana cigarette can do to one of our degenerate Spanish-speaking residents. ... While marijuana has figured in the greatest number of crimes in the past few years ..." ⁹ The arrest records from that time show no actual correlation between marijuana use and other crimes, nor heavy marijuana use among Mexican immigrants.

Given the lack of an actual drug problem, why did Mexicans get so much attention? In the period of agricultural growth that preceded the depression, farmers had welcomed the Mexican immigrants as a supply of cheap labor. In the midst of the depression, anti-Mexican sentiment began to grow from working class people because of the competition for increasingly scarce wages, and from the farmers

¹⁴ Harris, Marvin, *Cows, Pigs, Wars and Witches, The Riddles of Culture*, Vintage Books, New York, 1978

¹⁵ Harris, *ibid*, p.205

⁷ Brecher, *ibid*, Helmer, *ibid*, see also *Politics in Healing: The Suppression and Manipulation of American Medicine*, Daniel Haley, Potomac Valley Press, Washington, D.C., 2000, see also Griggs, B. *The Story of Western Herbal Medicine*, Vermilion Press, ISBN 0-09-181461-8

⁸ Warner, Richard, *Recovery from Schizophrenia: Psychiatry and Political Economy*, Harper and Row, NY., 1985, J. Leff, *The International Pilot Study of Schizophrenia, Five Year Follow-Up Findings*, *Psychological Medicine*, 22, 1992, p.131-145, Assen Jablensky, *Schizophrenia: Manifestations, Incidence and Course in Different Cultures*, A World Health Organization Ten Country Study, *Psychological Medicine*, Supplement 20, 1992, p.1-95

⁹ Helmer, *ibid*, p.55

because of increased organization and unionism among the Mexican workers. The anti-marijuana campaign occurred in conjunction with an escalation of violence and harassment toward Mexicans, and the forced repatriation of 200,000 Mexicans to Mexico. The repatriations were arbitrary and violent. People of Mexican origin were simply rounded up and put on trains and trucks, regardless of their length of residency or legal status.

The next drug war was again focused on blacks. As agriculture in the south became more mechanized, and mechanized agriculture became more profitable in the west, southern blacks moved into northern cities. The great migration of blacks into the urban north corresponded with the onset of urban blight in many of these cities as developers and businesses moved increasingly to suburban and undeveloped areas. The concentration of young blacks in urban areas created the potential for political trouble, as well as for an expanding drug market. Thus the fourth war on drugs was launched, and intensified, as the civil rights movement and urban riots broke out in northern "ghettos" in the 1950s and early 1960s. The communists were also implicated, as numerous legislators claimed that the reds were behind the drug "epidemic" and were using it to destroy America. As with all of the previous drug wars, the increasingly punitive and aggressive nature of the law gave police the right to arrest almost anyone at almost any time in urban areas on the basis of suspicion. Court records from that period indicate a high number of arrests that did not result in convictions. Thus drug law became a means of intimidation and disruption of any individual or group the police might choose to engage.

The drug warriors turned their attention in the late 1960s and 1970s on the new left and urban radicals, using the pretext of social contagion (the imagined threat to virtuous middle class children, particularly girls) to arrest and intimidate different individuals and organizations whom they chose to suppress. There was little evidence that marijuana or LSD ever posed a significant public health risk, especially compared to alcohol and tobacco, but they were convenient means of escalating law enforcement pressure on the newly resurgent left.¹⁰

The most recent drug war started was rekindled in the 1980s. The context for this new battle is the economic re-polarization of America. The populist movements of the early 20th century were responsible for progressive income taxes (where rich people pay more) as well as increased wages for workers. The affect of these changes was to mitigate, and to some extent reverse, the polarization of wealth in American society. Throughout much of the twentieth century, the gap between the rich and the poor got smaller rather than larger in the U.S. That was dramatically reversed in 1980 with the election of Ronald Reagan. The progressive tax system was rapidly dismantled. A very tight fiscal policy was introduced, dramatically

increasing interest rates. The affect of these measures was a severe recession, the deepest the country has seen since the Great Depression.¹¹ The purpose of this recession was, in the words of a Reagan economic advisor, "to break the back of the unions."¹² And it worked. As poverty increased, a new War on Drugs was launched. Again focusing on social contagion and the threat to middle class youth, again using the imagery of epidemic expansion regardless of whether the evidence supports any such claims. The economic polarization of American society has increased steadily in this period, as has the prison population.

The objective medical research indicates that alcohol and tobacco are among the most dangerous substances people commonly use. Tobacco kills an estimated 400,000 Americans annually, and alcohol about 300,000. The combined total deaths from overdoses and other biological affects of all illegal drugs combined is a little over 2000 per year, or less than 1% of the total from alcohol and tobacco. In laboratory tests, nicotine is the most addictive of commonly available drugs, more addictive than heroin or cocaine.¹³ Heroin users often put themselves at risk of hepatitis and HIV infections from using dirty needles, but the affects of the drug itself are highly overdramatized. A number of famous and "highly successful" business and political leaders, particularly in the 1800s, suffered from opiate addictions. The use of opiates does not appear to have any deleterious biological affect on the body, whereas the affects of social ostracization and criminalization are enormous. And I should clarify that I am not in any way encouraging the use of any drug. I have never used any mind altering substances, legal or illegal, and haven't taken an aspirin in over a decade, nor do I drink coffee or tea. Personal choices aside, it has been clear for over a century that the legal and political response to the use of various drugs has nothing to do with their health risks.

A brief mention of the failed drug wars that lost is also worthwhile. In the height of the AMA's drive to control the field of medicine, including patent medicines, and in the midst of a wave of anti-Irish sentiment stirred up by immigration prior to World War I, Prohibition was passed. As with other drug wars, organized crime got involved, and people continued to use the illicit substance.

11 Korten, David C., *When Corporations Rule the World*, Berrett-Koehler, Kumerian Press, West Hartford, 1995, Phillips, Kevin, *The Politics of Rich and Poor, The American Electorate in the Reagan Aftermath*, Random House, New York, 1990

12 Zeigler, Alexis, *Conscious Cultural Evolution, Understanding Our Past, Choosing Our Future*, Ecodem Press, Charlottesville, 2003, p.138, also at conev.org

13 For the impacts of alcohol and tobacco, see

<http://www.globalink.org/tobacco/trg/Chapter3/Chap3MORTALITY.html>,

http://www.cdc.gov/tobacco/research_data/health_consequences/mortality.htm,

http://www.cdc.gov/alcohol/factsheets/general_information.htm

For mortality data relating to illegal drugs, the Centers for Disease Control maintains an online database at <http://www.cdc.gov/> For interesting summaries of some CDC data, see

<http://www.briancbennett.com/writing/drug-deaths.htm>. <http://www.briancbennett.com>

10 Hoffman, Abbie, *Steal This Urine Test*, New York, NY : Penguin Books, 1987